

Culture and Identity Crises in Anurag Mathur's *The Inscrutable Americans*

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The Best selling author, Anurag Mathur wrote four novels. As an immigrant, he experiences a sense of detachment that arises out of physical and emotional alienation experienced by all people living away from their native cultures and have tried assimilating into a new one. In his novels, he explores the problems of immigrants, away from their homelands, and the protagonist's search for an identity and their attempt to redefine their identity.

Anurag Mathur's debut novel, *The Inscrutable Americans* is a best-seller in India. It has defied all the parameters of book market and has created a record in Indian publishing history by achieving the title 'bestseller' for eleven years. It brings us face to face with America from a delightfully new angle. In this novel Mathur presents a story of Gopal Kumar, the protagonist, who is a recently arrived student in America from a small town Jajau in India. Gopal is well prepared for his study of chemical engineering but not fully prepared for the cultural crises he has to face in Eversville, an unidentified state in America. As a result, this hilarious novel records the protagonist's identity crises, comic adventures and misadventures with the American land, language and culture. The twenty year old Indian student has all sorts of illusions about America which result into a series of comical incidents. As Gopal, a vegetarian Brahmin, decides to maintain his identity as an Indian vegetarian Brahmin and tries to stick to his vow to not to touch the three evils-wine, women and meat, he has to explore a lot the alien land to satisfy his hunger. It forces him into awkward situations which results into culture and identity crises. Mathur also skillfully satirizes American's racism in a series of incidents in which Gopal, as a black Indian, receives a different treatment than the three white Americans.

The Inscrutable Americans is a comic story of an Indian student who goes abroad for higher studies. The protagonist, Gopal Kumar, a young man from small Indian town called Jajau in Madhya Pradesh comes to America to study chemical engineering. His father owns National Hair oil factory. Gopal helps him since his school days. Before departing to America, his parents and grandmother have given him instructions to sit in the corner seat of the plane, to have vegetarian food made by Brahmins only, to avoid American women and unhealthy habits. At the beginning of the novel Gopal in his letter to his younger brother makes it clear that he is following the instructions given by his parents and others and trying to maintain his identity as an Indian vegetarian Brahmin. He writes:

Kindly assure mother that I am strictly consuming vegetarian food only in restaurants though I am not knowing, if cooks are Brahmins. I am also constantly remembering, Dr. Verma's advice and strictly avoiding American women and other unhealthy habits. I hope parents prayers are residing with me (Mathur 9).

By revealing Gopal's mind Mathur tries to suggest that the readers should be ready for East-West culture and identity clash from the very beginning of the novel. Gopal is born, brought up and trained in typical Indian Brahmin culture. Whether people are in India or in West, they are not allowed to eat meat, have sex before marriage and drink wine. Gopal's grandmother asks him to take oath that he will not touch three evils – meat, wine and women. On the contrary in Western culture almost all take non-vegetarian food, drink wine and experience premarital sex. For Gopal its challenge to maintain his identity and keep the vow he has given to his grandmother and parents.

Throughout the novel Mathur tries to explore the clash between the two cultures - American and Indian. The American culture is represented by Randy Wolf, Mr. and Mrs. Wolf, Gloria, Ann, Sue, Fred, Tom, etc., where as, the Indian cultural is represented by Gopal, his parents and grand mother, Sunil, Sushant, Anand, etc. The East-West cultural crises take place at various levels like religion, race, illegitimate sexuality, educational system, trade spirituality, poverty, unemployment, liquor addiction, eating habits etc. As the plot of the novel develops, Gopal finds the Western culture opposite of the Eastern. Mathur points out this by giving three examples. The Americans drive the vehicles on right side, turn the tap opposite to get water and switch on the light in reverse.

After the letter written by Gopal to his brother, Mathur switches to third person narration and directly comes to the central point of the novel, that is, American's obsession with sex. At New York when Gopal meets his two cousins Sunil and Sushant and moves through the city he is shocked to see huge hoardings of half naked women advertising a host of products. His cultural shock is well understood by Sunil who realizes that as sex is central to the American's psyche, the Americans don't hesitate to take the bedroom to the billboard. Sunil adds that it is this country that has the maximum synonyms indicating the sex act as Eskimos have number of synonyms for ice and Indians have number of words to describe their relatives. In the parking slot, while Sunil goes to park his car, Gopal is encountered by very tall, very good looking black man who offers him American sex doll. He says:

You looking for some fun... well my man, my main man what I got is some real live pussy for you. How about that now? Isn't that what you would like? Some real live, wild pussy just for you? Lets go get some of that man (Mathur 21-22).

As it was Gopal's first encounter with such a type of sex offer, he misunderstands the black man and rejects his offer by saying, "No, thank you sir...but I am vegetarian" (Mathur 22). Here Mathur points out that young students who are trained in Eastern culture having typical Indian identity are not habituated with such a type of offers, especially when they have just landed in Western culture. Gopal misunderstands the black man as a person who sells cats but in reality that man sells him a woman who will satisfy his sexual desires. Though Gopal fails to understand the exact meaning of 'pussy', he escapes to the parking slot to meet Sunil sensing something wrong in the offer. Mathur satirizes America for their obsession with sex. Sex is very common for them. Almost all Americans enjoy physical sex before they reach twenty. Gopal criticizes their attitude towards sex. Everywhere they can have sex and sexy advertisements. Their society is full

of divorces, misunderstanding, suffering and hatred. Gloria is a divorcee with three divorces. Gopal is shocked to know that Ann, Randy's friend, slept with nine hundred and ninety nine men. She wants to sleep with a virgin who will complete her goal to sleep with one thousand men. While commenting on Ann's obsession for sex Mathur writes:

Randy was waiting patiently, still undecided about how to break the news to Gopal that his cultured lady friend was legendary in Eversville for her proclaimed ambition of sleeping with one thousand different men. In a span of less than three years, she had, ...nearly reached her goal. She had only one left to reach the magic figure and she was determined to achieve this through the services of a virgin male so that her odyssey ended (80)

As soon as Ann comes to know Gopal's virginity, She makes him as her target to achieve her goal. On the contrary, Indian culture is known for spirituality and purity in human relations. Indian's human concern and sublime love win over mere physical sex, disorder and chaoticism in human relationship of the West. When Mahatma Gandhi is praised by Randy for his years of celibacy, Gopal defends Indian culture by saying we don't have naked women lying mile to mile. It shows that Eastern culture is still pure and sublime in sex. But it is being polluted by the Western culture. Gopal becomes victim of the polluted Western culture. He drinks wine, eats meat and loses his virginity while returning to India. While commenting on Gopal's first date, first drink and first beef, his friend Randy says:

"I'm not surprised. You had your first date, your first drink, and your first beef. And all in a nights work. You've got to expect to pay some price for it. C'mon, get off your butt. If you go to church may be god will forgive you for eating beef."(Mathur 120)

We also find the East-West cultural and identity clash in a series of incidents where Mathur wisely portrays America's racism. When Gopal, having his Indian black identity, joins his university, nobody offers him friendship. After few days Randy, becomes his friend and introduces Gopal to his friends in a peculiar way which brings out the racial discrimination clearly. Randy and his fellow yanks represent the white race, having American white identity, where as Gopal represents the black. While introducing Gopal, Randy says, "I would like you to meet my friend Gopal. He's the Maharajah of Delhi, his father has eighteen wives and he lives in a two hundred room palace" (Mathur 36). After this ironic introduction, Fred replies, "Hi..... sounds just like my old man. I'm Fred" (Mathur 36). This reply of Fred indirectly identifies an Indian as an uncivilized, uncultured, primitive human being who still follows the life of primitive old men like Ape. Gopal is treated as semi-nigger as he is brown and not totally black. His close friend Randy Wolf is no exception to that. One morning he comes to meet Gopal, opens Gopal's door and says:

Hey semi-nigger ... where are you ... well hurry up. I've got football. Lets go throw some. I mean its my duty to teach some poor ignorant

heathen like you the finer points of life in Yankee Doodle land (Mathur 64) .

By calling Gopal heathen Mathur brings out the attitude of the Americans towards Indians. They treat Indians as primitive, ignorant and uncivilized having no religion of their own. And as the Americans are civilized, well educated and refined in everything, it is their duty to teach the Indians like Gopal some finer ways of life. Even in the parties, hotels, libraries and everywhere Gopal is stared with nicknames like 'ass', 'donkey', 'Goddam' etc. As the Americans treated the blacks as inferior, they ask Gopal whether the Indian whites do the same in India. Gopal replies that everyone in India is brown. No one is black no one is white. He also scorns nature for making some black and some white.

Mathur in this novel also brings out the bright side of the dark picture Gopal faces in America. According to Mathur, in spite of racism, Americans are known for their open armed friendliness. It is noticed through Randy's friendship with Gopal and his taking him to his father's house. There Gopal finds Randy's mother to be just like his own. It is revealed clearly as the narrator remarks:

Gopal wondered if his mother's soul had somehow transmigrated across the globe and though visa-less, evaded the vigilance of the Immigration service and settled within Mrs. Wolf (Mathur 135-136).

Mrs. Wolf asks Gopal to stay in their house and eat good food so that he as well as Randy will have some meat on their bones. It shows that Randy's relations with Gopal are absolutely informal and this American friend shows his intimate relations with Gopal by using informal language in his conversation. Mr. Smith, the Dean of the college also shows friendly relations to Gopal. But not all white Americans are as friendly as Randy, his parents and Mr. Smith. Most of the American whites are colour-conscious. They considered brown skinned and dark skinned persons to be less acceptable than the white skinned ones. This colour-consciousness has taken an aggressive form in the white racists. They do not like foreigners to come to America. They terrorize foreigners and try to drive them out of their country. It is clearly noticed from the behavior and language of the members of the gang that assault Gopal. One of the members of the gang says:

I just don't like no Eye-ranians, boy. No furrin niggers neither. I jest don't like em. Comin here, taking our jobs, takin our women. I just don't like it, boy. Why don't you git back to your camel land while you can? (Mathur 98).

In the same manner the waiter Tom expresses his feelings about the foreigners. Mathur points out that America also has fanatics who carry campaigns against coloured people. It results into East- West cultural and identity crises.

While commenting on educational system, Mathur makes it clear that American academic institutions are friendly, supportive, well equipped and have encouraging work environment. On the contrary, in India the relations of colleagues are characterized by "Fierce eternal, all-encompassing hatred" (Mathur 148). So far as academic pursuits are

concerned. Americans love to analyse things and facts. Susheel Sharma while commenting on educational system in America observes:

Since the teachers in this America try to train their students in analyzing things and the students are not kept confined to retaining to what comes to them as second hand knowledge, they seem to be trying to make their students independent and make them move on the track leading to making discoveries and giving the world novel information (179).

On the contrary, in India and in most of the Eastern countries students depend on teachers. The habit of analyzing things and facts is not developed as it is done in the West. As a result their educational system and institutes are treated as superior to their counter parts in India. Indirectly it also results into East- West encounter.

Mathur's whole novel is devoted to the postcolonial East- West cultural crises. At the end of the novel Gopal realizes that his stay in America has helped him to grow up from childhood to manhood. Indira Nityanandam while commenting on Gopals homecoming observes:

Gopal keeps the two worlds of India and the U.S. apart and hence is never faced with a sense of rootlessness which many expatriate characters face. There is no personal anguish at the differences of everything that is new in the U.S. Hence there is no need for a process of acculturation or assimilation (Nityandam 28).

Thus Anurag Mathur in *The Inscrutable Americans* explores very skillfully the culture and identity crises of the Indian protagonist Gopal with his American counterparts. The white Americans always think that as they are white, they are superior to the black Indians who stick to superstitions, traditions and primitive life.

Works Cited :

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